

Three Assassins

by Nevermore

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> <meta name="Generator"> I guess this is the part where I include the disclaimers (I'm really big on disclaimers)

I guess this is the part where I include the disclaimers (I'm really big on disclaimers). Mutant Enemy Television, Inc. owns the characters of Buffy, Willow, Xander, Oz, Giles, Spike, Adam, and just about everyone else that's going to be in this story. My use is in no way meant to challenge any established copyrights, nor is it meant to detract from the commercial viability of the aforementioned (or any other) copyright.

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I include this small little warning for the benefit of anyone who considers himself to be an overly sensitive person. While this promises to be a kinder and gentler story than just about anything else I've ever written, there is a bit of violence. In short, this fanfic presentation of Buffy is intended for our adult and teen readers, and is not suitable for our younger readers.

If you liked this story, please let me know what you think. (Man cannot live on bread and water alone, but also needs the praise of fanfic enthusiasts.) If by chance you do like this, then check out some of my other stuff on fanfiction.net. (Granted, my other stuff generally tends to be darker and more violent.) It's not Buffy, but it's gothic punk with some coinciding themes. Enjoy.

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by

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Prologue

Buffy walked quietly through the graveyard, allowing her mind to wander freely. She had long ago memorized the names on virtually every gravestone and crypt entrance, so nothing in her surroundings was even remotely interesting to her. Adam's war had decimated both sides in the government's covert operation against demonkind, leading to the end of the Initiative and the scarcity of demons within Sunnydale's immediate vicinity. Lately there had been no pressing need for Buffy to be completely on her toes, and so she had begun to develop bad habits.

She rounded a corner and gazed at the ground, noting a fresh grave with a gravestone that she had not seen before. The name was "Agnes Decker." Buffy thought for a moment, trying to recall any news of a recent death that had suspicious causes. If a vampire had killed Agnes, Buffy knew she would have to wait for the body to rise as a demonic vampire of its own. It was then that Buffy noticed the dates on the stone " 1904-2000. Buffy smiled slightly, deciding that Agnes had died of old age and not as a vampire's victim. Even in Sunnydale, some people passed on without the aid of supernatural creatures.

A slight twinge in her spine was the only warning Buffy received that something was wrong. In an act borne out of countless battles and her own instincts as the Slayer, Buffy ducked, hearing a weapon cut through the air just above her head. She whirled and came face to face with her attacker. The bestial features on the man's face betrayed his nature as a vampire.

The man stood well above his small opponent. He was almost six and a half feet tall and well muscled, without being overdeveloped. His long black hair was braided and grew down to his waist, twirling with his movements almost of its own accord. He wore loose fitting black pants and lightweight, soft-soled black boots, and a black tunic with a charcoal gray sash. The vampire smiled thinly as Buffy recovered from his initial attack and gathered herself to counter her opponent.

Buffy backed up a couple of steps, gauging how dangerous an enemy she had found. The large vampire held a spear in his hands, and seemed to be waiting patiently for her to make the next move. His patience was unsettling, and Buffy found her feet unconsciously moving backward, giving her even more breathing room. She heard someone clear his throat behind her, and turned to find another vampire, this one holding a katana. The second vampire was smaller than the first, with close-cropped black hair and an obviously Asian heritage. For a split second Buffy contemplated how the second vampire resembled a young Jet Li, but she forced the thought from her mind and focused on the task at hand.

"Two of you to beat up on little old me?" she asked innocently. "I'd be flattered if I cared at all."

The smaller of the two vampires lunged at the Slayer, swinging his sword in a wide arc and forcing Buffy back in the opposite direction, toward her first opponent. Buffy looked behind her and noticed that the larger one was setting his spear and waiting for her. As their identical clothing had led her to suspect, the two were working together, and were not two random vampires who happened to show up in the same place at the same time. Buffy dove to her right and hit the ground in a roll. The smaller vampire continued to pursue, swinging high again and maintaining his body's momentum so he could follow the first high slice with a second one, aiming this time at Buffy's midsection. The speed and coordination of his attack caught the Slayer off-guard, and Buffy barely stepped back in time. He blouse was cut at her abdomen, but she escaped without being wounded.

Too close, she thought. _I must be getting rusty._ Rather than stop to admire his early success, or alternately rush in for the kill, the sword-wielding vampire kept his distance, continuing to swing his sword with measured, experienced precision. Buffy stole a quick glance toward the first one again, and noticed with dismay that he was no longer where he had been standing. The second vampire noticed her concern, and smiled thinly. It was the first expression he had made since Buffy had seen him, and it made her even more uneasy than his obvious mastery of his sword did. _He knows who I am,_ she realized. _No vampire would be this careful against a normal human. He's biding his time, waiting for me to make a mistake._

Buffy drew a stake from its hidden sheath on her back, beneath her blouse. The vampire saw her weapon and his grin disappeared. The confidence that had begun to spread across his visage began to fade, though he did not appear particularly worried, either. Buffy parried his next swing with her stake, and the steel sword bit through the wood and splintered her weapon. She dropped the remains of her stake and fell back another step, scanning the area again for her opponent's friend. The motion she caught out of the corner of her eye was the only warning that Buffy received. She hit the ground again, planning to roll toward the vampire with the sword and disarm him from up close. It was a tactic that she had used with great success on several occasions, and she moved with the quickness that only experience could give.

Before she could fully get her body moving, though, she was cut on the back of her left shoulder. She hit the ground harder than she had anticipated, and barely managed to complete her roll. Having lost momentum in the beginning of her movement, she came up short and saw the sword-wielding vampire right above her, the grin having returned. His arms were a blur as he swung his sword. Buffy avoided panic and swung her legs at his, sending the vampire to the ground with a leg sweep. In a quick motion Buffy was back on her feet and facing the vampire with the spear. He thrust his weapon at her, but she stepped forward at a forty-five degree angle, grasping the staff with her right hand as she punched her opponent in the face with her left. The vampire fell back a step under the impact of the blow, and Buffy followed. She knew that to win, she would have to take one of the vampires out of the fight quickly. A kick to her opponent's knee sent the vampire to the ground, but he continued to hold his spear. The Slayer also continued to grasp the weapon stubbornly, and was thrown off-balance as her heavier opponent fell to the ground. At that moment the second vampire returned.

He swung high as Buffy ducked low, and the Slayer caved in two of the vampire's ribs with a lightning-quick shot to the sternum. The punch barely slowed the vampire down, however, and the Slayer was thrown back on the defensive. It was then that her shoulder began to burn. She remembered the wound she had taken from the spear, and concluded that it had been worse than she had thought. She began to step away, deciding that retreat would probably be the best course of action. She would be able to fight these two vampires when she was better prepared. If nothing else, she would be using a sword of her own for the next few nights.

The burning began to spread quickly, and Buffy began to feel lightheaded as she backed away from her sword-wielding opponent. It was then that she caught the strange reflection of the cemetery's dim light off his weapon. There was a liquid of some sort on the blade, and Buffy knew in her heart that the weapons had been coated with poison. The deepest recesses of her mind began to panic, but Buffy nonetheless maintained her composure. She heard noise behind her again, and glanced back to see that the vampire with the spear had circled her, penning her in. The vampires both knew that she had been poisoned, and were patient enough to let the toxin do its work. They only needed to prevent the Slayer from escaping.

Buffy saw motion on her right, and in a flash a third man ran into the clearing and began swinging a staff at the vampire with the spear. Buffy's vision was already becoming cloudy, but she could see the vampire fall back immediately under the new man's assault. She saw the opening and darted away before she could be headed off. She looked back briefly as she ran, trying to note as many details as she could about her rescuer. He was about six feet tall, had close-cropped blonde hair, and was dressed in a dark gray trenchcoat. She could not see his face, and did not think it wise to wait around for the opportunity. She did what she knew was the tactically sound thing to do " she ran. It had been a long time since Buffy had been forced to flee a battle, and the taste of the experience felt sour. She knew, however, that she needed help. She had been stabbed and poisoned, and needed to return to Giles. He would be able to help her.

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I

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Buffy awoke and looked around the room, immediately trying to figure out where she was. Nothing looked familiar to her. The bright light of a full moon shone in through an open window. There was no glass, only a wooden shutter, and the thick wood of the window frame seemed old and weathered. The slightly chill night air blended strangely with the mustiness of the room into a faintly familiar scent, though Buffy could not remember ever being in this place before. The room was small and largely unfurnished. Besides the small bed upon which she lay, there was a small bureau with a mirror set in its top, and a chair placed next to the bed.

The Slayer moved to get up, and pain shot through her shoulder, reminding her of the wound she had taken in her battle. Questions began to pour into her mind, but before she could consider any of them, the door to the room opened and a thin, middle-aged man

entered. He stood only about five and a half feet tall, with dark skin, black hair, and brown eyes. A thin scar was etched on his right cheek, giving him a dangerous appearance. Despite this, however, Buffy felt safe with this man. She felt as if she knew him, and that feeling puzzled her more than anything else.

"Buenas noches. Estas bien?" he asked. Buffy looked at the man in confusion, trying to figure out what he had said. She realized he was speaking in Spanish, and she worked her mind to understand him. "How are you feeling?" he asked again. Buffy's mind alerted her to the fact that the question had been asked in Spanish, though she had heard it in English. The experience was unsettling.

"I'm feeling fine," she replied. The words sounded Spanish as she spoke them, and the man nodded with a friendly, relieved smile.

The man walked over to the bed, and motioned for Buffy to roll over onto her side. She did as she was told, exposing her back to the unknown man. It was an action that seemed strange to her, yet also perfectly acceptable. Without knowing why, she felt as if she could trust this unknown man with her life. She felt his hands lightly touch the back of her shoulder, and a small twinge of pain rose up from the area as Buffy realized the man was tending her wound.

"This is going to need a few more days to heal," he announced somberly. "We'll have to lay low until then."

"I want to get back out there and fight," Buffy stated boldly. "I've had worse than this."

"True," the man admitted, "but you have never faced a threat like this before."

Buffy wanted to object, to point out that she had faced The Master, Spike and Drusilla, The Principal, and recently Adam. Two vampires in a graveyard were no match for her if she was prepared. She just had not been ready to face a sword-wielding vampire on her rounds. Next time she would be ready. She wanted to say all this, but could not. In the back of her mind, a whispering voice opposed her confidence. This vampire clan was more than she had ever faced. A clan? she wondered, the thought coming to her that there were far more than only two demons. She thought back to the night before, and could remember only fighting a single pair of vampires. A third man had shown up, but he may or not have been a vampire. She had never seen his face, and thus could not be sure. By no stretch of the imagination had she faced anything that was even remotely large enough to be considered a clan.

She rolled back over and smiled at the man, and then the door burst open. The man turned and Buffy sat up, each of them coming face to face with two vampires, one of them holding the head of a housekeeper in his hands.

"Nice of the maid to invite us in, don't you think?" the one holding the head asked. Buffy recognized him immediately as one of the vampires from the graveyard, the one that been wielding the spear. "Good to see you again, Miguel."

Buffy's friend rose from his seat, and was immediately sent to the floor as the second vampire hurled an ornate dagger into his chest.

The razor-sharp weapon sliced the man's heart in half, killing him before he even hit the dirty floorboards. Buffy shot up from the bed and charged the two vampires, lightning quick punches knocking her foes off balance. She had her enemies reeling, but the one that had thrown the dagger was able to land a shot to her left shoulder, causing pain to erupt along the entire left side of her body. She staggered and fell back a couple of steps. For a brief instant she caught her reflection in the mirror on top of the bureau, and noticed with shock that the image was not hers. She appeared to be a young Spanish girl, likely no older than sixteen. She was struck with momentary confusion, and in that instant her enemies were upon her. She was tackled to the ground by the man that had thrown the dagger, and then straddled by the vampire who had held the spear the previous night.

Buffy looked up at the man who lay upon her, her eyes seething with fury. She tried to wriggle free, but was unable to do so. She was still weakened from the previous night's attack, and the two vampires were stronger than most that she had encountered. She was totally vulnerable, and knew it. The vampire bared his fangs and smiled widely, seeming to enjoy his victory.

"Don't be afraid child, I'm not going to kill you," he assured her in a kind voice. "I'm going to allow you to live forever." He leaned in and bit into Buffy's neck, and the Slayer was overcome with a feeling of ecstasy. A voice deep within her cried out in horror, though, as she realized that she would experience her greatest fear. She would be brought across. She would become a vampire.

Buffy screamed and tried to move, but was unable to. She looked around in panic, trying to mentally place herself once again. She was no longer in the small, decrepit room, but inside Giles' home. She heard movement to her left and turned her head in that direction, immediately seeing Giles leap out of an armchair and rush to her side.

"What is it, Buffy?" he asked breathlessly. "Are you alright?"

"I can't move," Buffy replied, her voice on the verge of panic. "Why can't I move?"

"Hold still, I had to tie you down," Giles replied. His voice immediately began to calm Buffy, and she realized that she had dreamt the entire encounter in the small Spanish room. The sun shone through a window, and Buffy's mind calmed. She was in no danger from vampires as long as the sun was in the sky.

"Why am I tied down?" Buffy asked, trying desperately to even recall arriving at Giles' home. She could remember fleeing the graveyard, but everything beyond that was a blank.

"Your shoulder took a nasty laceration, I'm afraid," Giles informed her. "You were feverish, and kept tossing. I stitched you back up, but I was afraid your movements would open the wound. I tied you down as a precaution. I'm sorry," he apologized, his fingers working quickly to undo the ropes.

"Forget it," Buffy said absently, still trying to shake the fear from her dream.

"Why were you screaming?" Giles asked. "And what happened to you last night?"

"I got jumped in the graveyard," she replied, answering his second question first. "As for the screaming, I just had a bad dream, that's all."

"A dream, or a vision?" Giles asked. Buffy had not even considered the possibility of a vision. It had been so long since she had received one that she had almost forgotten that, as the Slayer, she was prone to getting them.

"I'm not sure," Buffy answered honestly. "Now that you mention it, it did seem more like a vision. I felt like I was really there. That vampire from the graveyard last night was there, too." Her brow arched as she thought for a moment. "Yep," she concluded, "I think it was a vision."

"One of your attackers from last night was in the vision?" Giles asked, unable to mask the concern in his voice. "What did he look like?"

"Scary face, pointy teeth, you know the drill," Buffy responded simply. "He looked really vampirish."

"Is that all?" Giles asked, remembering how hard it was to get details from Buffy.

"Well, he was decked out in black, and wore a gray sash," Buffy added.

"A sash?" Giles asked in a whisper. Buffy knew the tone, and realized that Giles once again knew something she did not.

"Yeah, kinda like a Girl Scout, except it wasn't green, and he wasn't selling cookies," Buffy responded glibly. "What's the deal?"

Rather than answer the question, Giles walked over to one of his bookcases, pulled out a couple of books, and absently threw them to the floor. Buffy watched with curiosity as Giles then opened a hidden compartment in the back of the shelf that the front books had been concealing. From the hidden compartment he withdrew a small, leather-bound volume that Buffy had never seen before.

"What's that?" she asked.

Again the question was ignored as Giles opened the book and walked over the Slayer. "Were the vampires dressed like this?" he asked, pointing to a picture.

Buffy looked at the page, and felt a chill shoot up her spine. Not only was the outfit identical, but she was looking at the same face that had confronted her both in the graveyard and in her vision. "Who is that?" she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

"That's Zalos," Giles answered. "He was an extremely vicious vampire that started a clan of vampire assassins. They were called the Clan of Zalos. The survivors of the Clan were thought to have dispersed when Zalos was killed."

"When he was killed?" Buffy asked.

"Years ago, in a war against an order of magi," Giles answered, his voice taking on the tone he reserved for his special lessons in obscure, arcane knowledge of the occult.

"Well, first of all, he's not dead," Buffy informed her former Watcher. "Second of all, what are magi?"

"Not dead?" Giles asked. "Are you certain?"

"That's the guy that stabbed me," Buffy said with certainty. She wondered why Giles always asked her if she was certain when she said something unexpected. It was not as if it was unusual for surprising information to come to light when one lived above a Hellmouth, yet Giles always seemed unprepared. "He had a big spear and everything."

"Oh dear," Giles mumbled.

"Uh oh," Buffy replied, knowing that Giles was about to explain the newest supreme evil to walk into her life. She had to wonder what she feared more – the presence of a clan of vampire assassins in Sunnydale, or the boring dissertation dealing with these vampires which she was about to receive from her mentor.

"The Clan of Zalos was supposed to have been all but destroyed decades ago, the few remaining members scattering to the four winds," Giles explained. "At the turn of the century, the Clan was contracted to assassinate a new Slayer. Instead of simply killing her, Zalos decided to bring her across, to turn her into a vampire that he could add to his own ranks. This act enraged an order of magi, who declared a vendetta against the Clan. The resulting feud was supposed to have utterly destroyed the magi, and all but completely decimated the vampires."

"This Slayer that they brought across," Buffy said, interrupting Giles' less than riveting exposition, "she wouldn't have been Spanish by any chance, would she?"

"As a matter of fact, she was," Giles confirmed. "Her name was Carmina. How did you know that?"

"That was the vision I had," Buffy said. "So, like, what, is this going to happen again or something?"

"The vision is probably a warning," Giles stated. "It's likely that someone has discovered that the Clan still exists, and has hired them to assassinate you."

"And if they were all but wiped out, they'll probably want more bodies to add to their ranks," Buffy concluded. "So they're not simply here to kill me."

"I suppose not," Giles admitted. He knew that Buffy's greatest fear was being transformed into a vampire, and he could only imagine the turmoil that was consuming her behind a surprisingly calm facade. "You'll have to be extra cautious."

"Well, what about the magi?" Buffy asked, returning to her other

question.

"Magi are extinct," Giles said simply.

"But what were they?" Buffy asked curiously. She wanted to talk about anything other than the clan of assassins that had apparently been sent to kill her. For one of the few times in her life, she actually wanted to hear about something that had absolutely no apparent relevance.

"Magi were Half-breeds," Giles answered simply. "You know about demons, which are supernatural beings of evil and chaos." Buffy nodded slightly, letting Giles know that she was actually maintaining interest in one of his historical lessons. "Demons, as you know, are sometimes capable of mating with humans. These humans are often also given to evil and chaos. What you probably don't know, however, is that demons are not the only supernatural forces living amongst humans. There is an opposing force, usually referred to as faeries."

"As in those cute little people with wings?" Buffy asked.

"Not usually," Giles replied impatiently. "They were once as many and varied as demons, but over the centuries they began to disappear from the world. They were a force of purity and order, but humans tended to choose independence rather than order. Many faeries retired from the world, allowing their frustration with humanity to overwhelm their sense of duty. Some stayed and fought, however. While they remained in the world, they would sometimes mate with humans, just as the demons did. These half-breeds were referred to as kith, and had mystical powers. Over time, the kith began to focus their energy and use it as a form of magic."

"Like witches," Buffy concluded.

"No," Giles replied evenly. He could hardly believe that Buffy was still interested in what he was saying, and so he continued. "As you've seen with Willow, witches use ancient languages and spells to unlock the mystical powers of the universe. This is all unnecessary for a mage. A mage only needs to think about an effect, and it will occur. Their own force of will is enough to shape magic."

"No way," Buffy said skeptically.

"Yes, Buffy," Giles continued. "The wizards of folklore were often magi."

"So if they were so powerful, what ever happened to them?" Buffy asked.

"The magi were slowly killed off," Giles answered. "Their faerie ancestors left the world, and fewer and fewer kith were interested in fighting a war for humans that seemed increasingly disinterested. There are still kith in the world, but they no longer know how to fully employ their abilities. They often only know that there is something unique about themselves. Some become fortune-tellers or stage magicians, but gone are the wizards of old."

"And these vampires fought them and won?" Buffy asked, finally realizing the situation in which she found herself. "Now I'm supposed

to stand against them?"

"As I said, you'll have to be extra cautious," Giles repeated.

"Maybe I should get the Scooby gang in on this one," Buffy said. She was reluctant to bring her friends into a situation that could endanger them, but she also had a growing fear that she would be unable to defeat the Clan of Zalos on her own. As Willow and Xander had told her time and again, they were her friends, and wanted to stand beside her as she faced down evil.

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II

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"How's it going, Buff?" Willow asked as Buffy walked into their dorm room.

"Big bad evil is in town," Buffy answered. "Again," she added. For a brief moment she felt as if the unending pattern of her life had grown tiresome, but she shook the feeling off and focused on the task at hand. "I already called Xander and Riley and asked them to come over."

"You called Xander?" Willow asked. Both women knew that Xander was fairly defenseless in a battle, at least as compared to the rest of them. Buffy had the strength and skill of the Slayer, Willow was a witch, and Riley was a trained soldier. Xander was armed with little more than a razor-sharp wit.

"We've been leaving Xander out of things for a long time now," Buffy answered. "He's been one of us from the beginning, and I'd like it to stay that way. Maybe he won't be with us on the front lines, but he could help somehow. I know he hates always being left out."

"Ok," Willow said skeptically. "So what's the big bad?"

"Let's wait on that until the others get here," Buffy replied. "It would suck to have to say it all twice." She went to the closet and pulled out her bag of weapons, and then turned quickly to Willow, remembering that she had overlooked an important detail. "You wanna call, Tara?" she asked. "I didn't mean to leave her out or anything."

"No, she went home for a few days," Willow responded with a smile. She felt better that her friend had remembered to try to involve Willow's lover in the plans. Ever since Willow had come out of the closet, she had felt as if her friends looked disapproved of her lifestyle and looked down on her. A degree of acceptance was nice. _Besides,_ Willow thought, _Tara is a witch, too. She could help out a lot. It's too bad here she isn't here for this._

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A knock came at the door, and a moment later Riley and Xander walked in, not waiting to be invited. They knew that the door would have been locked had the girls needed privacy.

"Are you alright?" Riley asked Buffy immediately. He could tell instantly that she was weak, or at least weaker than was usual for her. Her skin was slightly pale, and her eyes not as bright as usual.

"I'm fine," Buffy answered. "I just got stabbed and poisoned last night."

"And here I thought my night of fun with Play Station couldn't be topped," Xander quipped.

"Stabbed and poisoned?" Riley asked, showing his concern.

"The spear didn't go too deep, and the poison was apparently only a paralytic," Buffy answered absently, not appearing concerned with what had occurred. It was not like she had never had worse in her life.

"What?" Riley asked incredulously. After months, he still could not fathom how fast and loose Buffy was with her life. Her superhuman ability to recover from injury caused her to never take much of anything seriously.

"It could have been worse," Buffy pointed out. "They could have used a deadly poison. I guess I was lucky they wanted to make me a vampire rather than just kill me. The poison was only meant to disable me."

"What?!" Riley asked.

"Are you ok, Buffy?" Willow asked. She, like Giles, knew how Buffy felt about being transformed into a vampire, and doubted that Buffy was handling the experience as coolly as she appeared to be.

"I'm fine, really," Buffy assured her friends.

"So you were jumped by vampires?" Riley concluded.

"Yeah," Buffy answered. "There were two of them. Giles said they descend from some kind of clan of assassin vampires, but as far as I know, only two are here."

"Assassins?" Riley asked. He learned more and more about the occult every day he was around Buffy. When he had arrived in Sunnydale, Riley had quickly accepted the army's party line that demons were nothing more than semi-intelligent sub-terrestrial animals. He had not wanted to consider any other possibilities. After all, to admit that demons were real would mean that every night he had laid awake as a child, afraid of the monster under his bed, there could actually have been a fiend there, waiting to snatch him into the Abyss. That was more information than he had ever wanted to handle. When he had met Buffy, he had, in fact, discovered the truth about demons. Now, apparently, he knew that they could organize themselves into professional guilds. It figured that they would hire themselves out to kill people. "Wait a second," Riley said suddenly. "If they're assassins, are they here to kill you, or someone else? Did it seem like you just happened upon them by accident as they were stalking another victim?"

"Nope," Buffy said evenly, shaking her head slightly. "These guys had the whole 4-1-1 on me. They treated the fight as if they knew I was the Slayer. They were cautious and professional, and had obviously worked together before."

"Well at least it's nice to know they take their work seriously," Xander commented. "Shoddy work is all too common a thing nowadays." Buffy and Willow smiled at their friend's comment, but Riley simply cast a disapproving glance. He did not see how jokes would help them as they focused on a plan.

"If they were after you, they'll be back," Riley said. "You don't look near 100% yet. Maybe we should all lay low."

"Sure, and then they'll start killing innocent people to get me to come out and face them," Buffy pointed out. "Part of the being the Slayer is protecting the innocent. I can't do that if I'm cowering."

"Not cowering," Riley clarified, "simply taking a little time to lick your wounds. I don't think being the Slayer means you have to throw your life away by fighting when you're already injured."

"I can take care of myself," Buffy shot back, her intensity making Xander and Willow uncomfortable and Riley irritated. Buffy had thought it cute the first time Riley had been protective, and had even thought it slightly endearing as he did it a second time. After months, however, she had grown sick and tired of his chivalrous, overly protective demeanor. The fact that she was a woman was not a handicap. She could pummel both men in the room at the same time, and they both knew it. It frustrated her that they would not act on that knowledge.

"I never said you can't take care of yourself," Riley explained. "I just don't want you to get hurt." The pathetically contrite look on his face softened Buffy's heart immediately, and she smiled warmly.

"I know you didn't mean anything by it," she cooed. "I'm just a little sick of being protected. Like I said, I can take care of myself. Besides, there was someone else in the graveyard last night."

"Who?" Willow asked immediately, unable to hide her curiosity.

"I don't know," Buffy answered. "I was really in a bad situation, and thought my time might be up. But then some guy came jumping into the fray. All I really remember was that he was dressed in gray, and was fighting with a quarterstaff. I don't think I saw his face, but I was getting really groggy by that point. I don't even remember getting back to Giles' place."

"So what did Giles think?" Willow asked. "Is this some mystical knight in shining armor?"

"Do you think he had a sister?" Xander asked.

"You already have a girlfriend," Willow said, punching Xander lightly on his shoulder. "And I don't think you'd ever want to cheat. Women who were former vengeance demons probably don't handle infidelity

well."

"I don't even want to think about it," Xander said with a shudder. He had always been uncomfortable with dating Anya for that exact reason — she had tortured and toyed with men over the course of a thousand years, inflicting punishment for the pain they had caused their lovers. Xander could not imagine how creative Anya might be in getting payback if the couple ever split.

"I didn't tell Giles about the other guy," Buffy admitted.

"Why not?" Riley asked. He could hardly believe that Buffy would hold back something that seemed so relevant.

"I'm not sure," Buffy said, trying to explain herself. "There was just something about him — it's hard to explain. It's just that something inside me said that this guy wouldn't want anyone to know he's here."

"Well then it's a good thing you only told us," Xander said sarcastically. "It's not like any of us knows anyone in the occult community that might be interested in staff-swinging heroes."

Buffy just looked at Xander in exasperation for a moment, and then turned back to the matter at hand. "I'm only telling you guys in case he shows up again," she explained. "I don't want you beating the crap out of someone that might be there to help."

"So we get to go?" Xander asked excitedly. "Why are you letting us go this time?"

"You always say you want in, and you were there for me against Adam," Buffy answered. "It meant a lot to have you with me to help. It was sorta like old times. It's not like we're stopping the apocalypse here — again — but I could use some help."

"So you're certain about the whole 'no apocalypse' thing, right?" Xander checked. "I would hate to get out there and realize I hadn't worn my 'End of the World' togs."

"No, I think it's just assassin vampires," Buffy assured her friend, spreading a smile across her lips.

"Just assassin vampires," Xander repeated. "That's it? Gee." He made it appear as if he was trying to think of something else to do, but did not maintain the charade for long. The truth was that he could hardly wait to get back in the field, fighting the good fight with his friends.

"Well then we only have two hours before sundown," Riley said with a glance at his watch. "We better get whatever gear we need together, and get ready to crack some skulls."

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III

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Xander walked through the graveyard slowly, jumping at the slightest

sound. He could not believe that he had been talked into performing as the bait. He missed Cordelia a lot sometimes, though usually only when someone had to play the role of a helpless Happy Meal on legs. Xander had resisted bitterly, saying that if the assassins were truly after Buffy, they would probably ignore him and wait for their true target. That argument had crumbled, though, as soon as Buffy pointed out that as they were vampires, they would have to feed. Xander would likely offer as acceptable a meal as anyone else would.

Xander continued for over half an hour before he heard movement behind him. He turned slowly, not entirely sure he wanted to see what was there, and came face to face with what he concluded was one of the vampires that had attacked Buffy the night before. His eyes went wide as he saw the size of the man before him, and Xander silently cursed Buffy for not telling him the vampire was twice his size.

The vampire reached out and grabbed his human prey, preventing him from screaming out for help from his comrades. Buffy and the others had stayed back about a hundred yards, so that they would not give their presence away. _They're the length of a football field away, and I'm helpless to call to them,_ Xander thought desperately. The human features on the man's face faded as he exposed his fangs, and Xander knew he had about a second to act. He threw his weight backwards while thrusting his foot into the vampire's abdomen and grabbing his tunic. In a move that surprised even Xander with its precision and effectiveness, he tossed the vampire over him, sending the demon to the ground, lying on its back.

Xander shot up onto his feet and glared at the vampire, stunned with his success. He could hardly believe that a move he had gotten from "Enter the Dragon" could possibly have worked so perfectly for anyone but Bruce Lee. "Not so bad after all, are ya?" he taunted loudly, knowing his voice would bring his friends running. The vampire rolled over and stood up in one fluid motion, and Xander raised his hands defensively, knowing he would probably need to hold the demon at bay until Buffy showed up. He would only have to last about ten seconds. The demon smiled smugly, and then sent a lightning fast kick into Xander's sternum, knocking the wind out of him and doubling him over. The vampire strode the two steps to his prey, and prepared for the kill.

Again Xander was surprised at himself, shaking off the pain of the strike more quickly than he had thought possible. He clasped his hands together as the vampire bent over him, and gathered his strength for as vicious a strike as he could land.

Buffy approached the clearing as quickly as she could. She saw Xander on his knees, prone before a vampire that was readying for the kill. She poured every last bit of her strength into her strides, hoping desperately to close the distance before Xander was killed. She knew she was too far away, and shouted, trying to distract her enemy. "Hey, remember me?!" she yelled out.

The vampire turned and smiled, as if he knew that he held the life of one of Buffy's friends in his hands, and bared his fangs and bent in for the kill. In a move that stunned the Slayer, Xander swung his clasped hands with all his might directly at the vampire's jaw, catching the demon dead on and sending him sprawling. Buffy almost stumbled as she saw Xander send the vampire to the ground, and she drew her stake, Mr. Pointy, in preparation for a quick kill.

Xander stood and smiled, and was then sent spinning under the force of a dagger that was thrown from the shadows, plunging into his chest. Buffy lost all sense, not even knowing whether or not she screamed. All she knew was that a sudden wave of rage overtook her, and she hurled herself at the one vampire she could see. She tackled Zalos to the ground, but the vampire was able to pry himself from the Slayer's grasp.

He turned toward the shadows, and caught a spear that was tossed out to him. A moment later, the second vampire, with a sword, also appeared in the clearing. Buffy grinned at the two of them as she dropped her stake and drew a longsword from a sheath on her hip. She had been prepared this time, and she would send these two demons back to hell.

The Slayer wanted to check Xander, to see if he was somehow still alive, but she knew that diverting her attention would only get her killed, and destroy any chance for survival that Xander might still have. Riley and Willow were only a couple of seconds behind her, and they would be able to tend to their friend.

Riley had been only a few steps behind Buffy, but by the time he reached the clearing she was already in full melee combat with the two vampires. He dropped his rifle, knowing better than to risk a shot while Buffy was in close quarters with their enemies, and instead drew a military police baton and tried to find an opening. The shorter vampire, the one with the sword, overextended himself on a swing, and Riley jumped in between his girlfriend and her vampire assailant. The vampire swung his katana in wide arcs, keeping his human adversary at bay, seeming only to delay the fight. Riley wondered why, but received the answer moments later. A third man in black, wearing a gray sash and having his hair in a scalp lock, entered the clearing, twirling a dagger in each hand. Riley knew he had been outmaneuvered, and had no chance of defeating two of these assassins. He was having enough trouble against only one of them.

"Buffy, another one!" Riley shouted, hoping Buffy would be willing to add another enemy once again. She risked a glance toward Xander, and saw that Willow was already tending to their fallen friend. They would be unable to withdraw until they could first get Xander away safely.

Buffy tried to move over to help Riley, but Zalos sidestepped quickly, cutting her off from her boyfriend. The vampires' tactic seemed simple enough. Zalos would simply keep Buffy busy while the other two cut Riley to pieces. Then the three of them would easily be able to overwhelm the Slayer. "Riley, run!" Buffy shouted. She realized her chances of escaping were slim, but she at least wanted to make certain that her friends got away.

While her friends were fighting, however, Willow was bent over Xander. "Are you ok, Xan?" she asked. She could not imagine her lifelong friend being dead.

"I'm fine," Xander moaned. He looked at the dagger, and noted with relief that it had simply hit his left shoulder, missing his heart by at least four inches. The wound was already starting to burn, however, and he remembered what Buffy had said about the poison.

"Take it out, Will," he said, gritting his teeth and preparing for the pain.

"You're supposed to leave it in until we get to the hospital," Willow said, her voice on the verge of panic.

"It's poisoned, Will, I can feel it," Xander said. For a brief moment he pondered the reaction he would get if he walked into the hospital with an ornate, twelve-inch dagger sticking out of his shoulder, but he forced the thought from his mind as an idea occurred to him. "Does poison affect vampires?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Willow replied. "At least not usually. Anyway, I can't pull that out of you. You'll have to wait for Buffy to do it."

Through his pain, Xander's face showed his disappointment, and he pulled himself into a seated position. He knew immediately that they were all in serious trouble. Buffy was being hard-pressed, and Riley appeared ten seconds from being sliced into pieces. At that moment, the man in gray appeared again, somersaulting through the air, over a gravestone, and right in between the two vampires that were threatening Riley.

"Get your friend out of here," he instructed, his voice containing the slightest hint of an Irish lilt. He swung his quarterstaff and parried the sword, and then jabbed the knife-wielding vampire in the gut. Riley saw that the newcomer appeared to have the situation under control, and rushed over to Xander. He lifted his wounded friend onto his shoulder, and turned to Buffy.

"Buff, we gotta get out of here!" he yelled, letting her know that her friends were mostly in the clear, and that they could run. He looked at the man in gray, and saw a thrusting blade burst forth from one end of the staff, and a cutting blade swing open from the opposite end. Once cutting edges were exposed, the two vampires gave him a wider berth, allowing him to back off in the direction that Riley, Willow, and Xander were going. Seeing her friends safe, Buffy also began to back away, but she knew that her opponents would likely not allow her to flee.

The man in gray also realized the situation, and decided he had to cripple at least one of the vampires that were attacking him. He looked back at Xander again, and saw that the dagger was still protruding from his shoulder. He smiled as he continued his attacks. A moment later Xander screamed in pain, and the dagger that had been in his chest came flying through the air and struck one of the vampires in the throat, sending him to the ground and allowing the man in gray to concentrate on only one opponent.

The vampires had not expected to face such numbers, especially not with one of their own number injured, and raced off into the darkness, allowing Buffy and her friends to escape. Buffy led them all to Giles' home, hoping her ex-Watcher would be able to do something to treat Xander. He would not heal as quickly as Buffy had, and so Giles' simple stitching would likely not be enough. The man in gray followed the other four. Buffy looked at him a couple of times during the short walk, but did not say a word. For some reason, she trusted her new acquaintance, and could see from her friends' faces that they all did, as well. She would certainly need to get an

explanation, though, as she was certain that there was far more going on than she was aware of.

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IV

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"Is he going to be ok?" Willow asked anxiously as soon as Giles emerged from the back room.

"I believe so," the Englishman replied. "The wound was deep, but luckily missed every organ, nerve, and major blood vessel in the area. It was only a flesh wound."

"He will always be a lucky one," the man in gray muttered, drawing all eyes to him and unofficially announcing to all present that the time had come to finally get some answers from their mysterious guest.

"So who exactly are you?" Giles asked.

"My name is Tristan Ryan," the man answered. "This is the Slayer, I assume?" he asked, gesturing toward Buffy.

"That's right," Buffy muttered.

"It's been quite awhile since I've fought alongside a Slayer," Tristan commented. "I forgot just how formidable your lot is."

"Thanks," Buffy replied. Part of her wanted to leap out of the chair and strangle Tristan until he explained who he was and what he was doing in her town. Another part, the one that currently held sway, however, was intent on being friendly and courteous to the man. Something about him seemed genuinely pure, an aura, so to speak, that caused her to trust him implicitly.

"I'm a mage," Tristan said softly, as if he expected someone to be listening to his words from outside the window.

"I was under the impression that the magi were extinct," Giles replied. "Where exactly did you come from?"

"I was a member of Iseult's Knights," he said. Giles nodded in sudden understanding, though the explanation did nothing to fill in any of the others that were present.

"You worked with the Slayer," Giles said, filling in everyone else.

"Yes," Tristan confirmed. "Once Rome fell and civilization collapsed, demons ran rampant, preying upon humans at will. This continued for centuries, until the Inquisition. The humans took back what they could, burning vampires and demons. What could have been victory was spoiled, however. They were superstitious and uneducated. Few humans outside Ireland knew the difference between faeries and demons, and so both were put to the flame. In the face of this perceived betrayal, faeries gave up on protecting the humans and the world,

leaving them to fight the war on their own. All that was left were the kith, the half-breeds that had mystical abilities, and, of course, the Slayer. We did what we could, but as now, it seemed a losing battle.

"Around the turn of the century, these same vampires that are here now, they're called the Clan of Zalos, if you didn't know, were hired to assassinate the Slayer. Rather than simply kill her, they brought her across, making her a vampire that served their cause. My brethren went mad at the atrocity, and declared war against the Clan. We lost." The mage looked to the faces in the room, making certain that everyone had kept up with his story. Riley looked extremely dubious about what he had heard, but it appeared as if everything had made sense to the others.

"How is it you escaped?" Giles asked. His tone was not suspicious so much as curious, but Tristan's demeanor darkened nonetheless.

"I fled," he replied. "I opened a portal to Tir Nanog, an extra-dimensional faerie kingdom. I was still young, only a shade over fifty, and knew I would not last long against vampire assassins that had been fighting the likes of me for centuries."

"Only fifty?" Willow asked, repeating the mage's words. "You don't look fifty." Indeed, Tristan's face was the picture of youth and strength. He still had only the faintest wisps of stubble on his face, and his eyes had the exuberance of youth. _The eyes,_ Willow pondered, looking into Tristan's indigo orbs. They seemed to glow, almost with their own iridescence. She had never seen eyes like that, and they drew her in, grabbing her attention and making her feel warm and safe.

"I'm now almost a hundred and fifty," Tristan said with a thin smile. "I'm almost fully mature." He looked at Giles and knew that the Watcher understood, but that his charges did not. "My father was elven," he explained. My mother was kith herself, her mother having been faerie folk. I gained magic from my mother, and longevity from my father. Barring injury or illness, I should probably live well into my seven-hundreds."

"Wow," Willow muttered.

"And you're here to fight vampires," Riley said suspiciously. "Why here? Why now?"

"This is where the Slayer is," Tristan answered. "I have been in Ireland, my homeland, honing the skills that I was taught in Tir Nanog. I heard about the fiasco with the Mayor, and decided I should look into the Slayer. Then I found out that the Order of Zalos still existed, and I delayed coming here to hunt them down."

"I don't think you're quite finished with your hunting," Riley commented.

"You should thank your lucky stars I was hunting them at all," Tristan replied evenly. "If I hadn't been watching them, I would not have known that they had been hired to kill your girlfriend."

"Who hired them?" Buffy asked immediately. It had already occurred to her that she had an enemy behind the scenes, someone that preferred

to attack with assassins rather than straight on. That concerned her greatly.

"I don't know," Tristan replied, his eyes projecting a great level of sincerity. "I wish I did. The assassins appear to only work through a middleman, but I haven't located him yet."

"That's obviously a problem we can address later," Giles said. "The immediate concern is the vampires that are here right now."

"I think you should all get some sleep for now," Tristan commented. "You all look like you need it."

"What about you?" Willow asked.

"I can go a couple of weeks without sleep," Tristan replied. "I can watch over you for now. Get some rest, and we'll get together tomorrow."

Buffy and Riley nodded and walked upstairs to Giles' spare bedroom, and Willow stretched out on the sofa. Giles simply stared at Tristan, waiting for Willow to fall asleep. Once her breathing had slowed and become shallow, Giles finally spoke again.

"Is there anything you can do for Xander?" he asked.

"Yes, there is," Tristan answered. "I would have helped him earlier, but the effect might be surprisingly effective. More so than it would be on a human."

"Excuse me?" Giles asked, not having any idea what Tristan was talking about.

"The boy is kith," Tristan said with a thin smile. My healing magic, which is normally rather limited, will work more effectively on him than it would on a mortal."

"Xander's kith?" Giles asked dubiously. He could not believe that Xander had mystical ancestors. There was absolutely nothing exceptional about the boy.

"One of his ancestors was a luck spirit," Tristan said confidently. "It's obvious in the boy's aura. Hasn't he demonstrated any great amount of luck?"

"Perhaps," Giles admitted. He had never thought of Xander's luck as being supernatural in origin, but he had always noted with amazement that Xander Harris seemed to emerge surprisingly unscathed from every battle he entered at Buffy's side. In three years of fighting, the worst he had ever experienced was a broken arm. "I never would have guessed," the Englishman said with a thin smile.

"Do you have any tea?" Tristan asked, already knowing that an English host was bound to have tea somewhere in his cupboards. "I'm a little thirsty, and this working is going to take a bit out of me."

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Once the gray light of dawn announced safety from vampires, Tristan walked out of Giles' home silently, making certain that no one noticed him leave. He knew that he had accomplished everything that he had set out to do thus far, and now he needed to check in with his apprentice. He moved into a nearby shadow caused by the early morning light, and traced a doorway in the air, a shimmering line of light following in the wake of his index finger's motion. Once the entire rectangle had been formed, the area inside the lines began to shimmer, and Tristan stepped through his magically conjured portal. He found himself instantly transported back to the old warehouse, a structure he knew had once been used by Angel, Spike, and Drusilla. It was here that Angel had resurrected Acathla, hoping to have the demon suck the world into hell. While the plan had been foiled and the portal close, there was still a great deal of ambient magic in the area, a result of the demon's exertion of mystical energy. For many years to come, this would be a place of power, a perfect place for a wizard to rest and regain his strength.

He had only been in the building for moments before a young man in a brown cloak walked up. "How did everything go, Master?" the second man asked. This was Sean O'Riordan, the apprentice that Tristan had been training for almost fifteen years. Like Tristan, Sean was a descendant of faerie folk. However, his genealogy contained no elven blood, so he would age much like any normal human. Sean's parents had been well aware of their mystical heritage, and knew well that Sean would be capable of working magic. Sean had descended from nymphs, nature spirits that had been allied with leprechauns in the world's younger days. As a result of his background, Sean was closely in tune with nature and the life forces of the world. His magic was less destructive than his master's, but could be just as useful in a combat setting. Sean's parents had sent their infant son to Camelot, the ancient home of King Arthur which had been mystically transported into the faeries' home realm. They had wished for him to be trained to be a wizard, and Merlin himself had been the boy's first master. Once Sean had grown old enough to start understanding his role, he decided to become a demon hunter. It was then that he had been sent to Tristan, the last of Iseult's Knights, the ancient order of magi that had been committed to opposing the forces of darkness that had dwelt in the world.

"Everything seemed to go well enough," Tristan replied. "It was my impression that they believed every word I told them."

"As you expected," Sean commented.

"Do not be too proud of my success," Tristan warned, taking care to gaze deeply into his student's eyes as he spoke. "What I am doing here in Sunnydale is shameful. My order was always known for working closely with the Slayer. My deception is deplorable."

"But for the greater good," Sean quickly pointed out.

"Perhaps that is irrelevant," Tristan answered quickly. Tristan had always been wary of his young student, seeing too great a mark of modern American society on him. It was curious, especially since Sean had been sequestered away from the modern world for much of his life as he had been trained. "The goal is a noble one," Tristan continued,

"but our methods should not be considered a guideline for future action. Never think that what we do here is acceptable in the future. Remember that you will be judged almost exclusively by your actions, and not the noble results that you derive from constant manipulation."

"Yes, master," Sean replied with a slight nod. He understood what Tristan was saying, but he doubted whether or not his master knew exactly what he was talking about. Sometimes Sean felt as if his teacher had not only grown too old to change, but had spent too much time away from the world to ever again blend into society. The combination of the two made for a man too locked in the idealistic past with no way to adapt to reality.

"Enough of this idle chatter," Tristan said offhandedly as he walked toward a crate he had placed in a corner. "You should go over your lessons, and rest your mind for tonight. You'll need to be as sharp as possible."

"Master?" Sean asked. He could hardly believe Tristan's words. It had sounded as if the mage had actually planned to have his apprentice accompany him in the next battle.

"Tonight you will have the opportunity to earn your gray cloak," Tristan said with a thin smile, his expression betraying his pride despite his even tone. _Yes,_ he decided, _Sean was certainly ready to be tested._ In the order of Iseult's Knights, it was tradition for an apprentice to stay away from the field of battle until his master determined that the student was ready. The trial was combat, and success determined by survival. Any candidate that survived his first encounter with a demon was granted the gray cloak, a symbol of the order, and could dispense with the brown cloak of the apprentice. For his part, Tristan had not worn a cloak at all since his return to the realm of the mortals. Instead, he wore a lightweight, charcoal gray trenchcoat. It had the same significance in his mind, and also did not draw undue attention in public.

"What weapon would you recommend me to use?" Sean asked. During his training, he had become well trained in the use of several weapons, but hand-to-hand combat was not what his master had in mind.

"You will be unarmed," Tristan answered. He saw his protégé's puzzled look, and decided to continue. "You will not be doing any of the actual fighting. Your role will be to stay in the back, and use your magic to aid the rest of us."

"I don't get to fight?" Sean asked, his disappointment obvious.

"I am the last of Iseult's Knights," Tristan said. "If I fall, you will be the only man anywhere in the realms of the living that would understand our training. You will have to take an apprentice of your own. Besides," he added hesitantly, knowing the criticism would offend his apprentice, "your weak point has always been magic. I know well your mastery of weapons. I need to see if you can maintain your concentration enough to cast in battle. If you can prove to me that you're capable of that task, then you deserve to be accepted into the ranks of my order."

"Yes, master," Sean said, not hiding his bruised ego any better than Tristan had expected him to.

"Now do as I said and get some rest," Tristan repeated. "We go out at nightfall."

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V

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"So is that Tristan guy gonna show up again?" Xander asked as he walked back into the living room.

"I would rather think so," Giles replied, amazed at the progress that Xander's wound had made. In only the span of a day, little more than twelve hours, the flesh had almost completely mended, and the young man already had a full range of motion, albeit with a great deal of pain.

"I think we'll need him to," Willow said. "Two of those vampires would have been bad enough. Three could be dangerous."

"Yeah," Buffy muttered. As usual, Willow had a gift for understatement. Buffy had not let on just how hard-pressed she had been against Zalos the night before. The encounter almost reminded her of her sparring matches with Angel, except for the fact that Zalos was better and stronger. She had been able to tell that the other two vampires were not much less skilled than their master. In fact, Buffy was amazed that Riley had been able to walk away from the encounter. If the fight had gone more than another thirty seconds, she knew her lover would have been filleted, and that she would then likely have been overtaken by sheer numbers. She cast a glance toward Riley, and saw just how concerned the soldier was. She could tell that Riley was well aware of how close he had come to getting killed.

"Have you gotten all your strength back?" Giles asked, referring to the poison that Buffy had been exposed to two nights earlier. The Slayer's color had returned and she seemed to be her usual perky self, but Giles still had some reservations about sending her back out so soon.

"I'm fine," she said, just as Giles had expected. "I'm more concerned about the rest of you."

"I'll be alright," Riley stated stoically. Buffy could tell, though, that Riley was truly hurting from the previous night's conflict. He had been punched and kicked repeatedly, and his torso was covered with bruises. Without the recuperative abilities of a Slayer, Riley would be less than a hundred percent for some time.

"I've prepared a potion that I think could really help," Willow said, producing a bottle from her backpack. "It's an immunity to poison, so you won't have to worry about getting the slightest scratch. I also looked up a couple of spells that I think could help." She looked around the room at the approving smiles, and realized that she should clarify the situation. "Well, actually, Giles helped me with finding the spells. But I did the potion on my own."

"Thanks, Will," Buffy said with a grin.

"Just lead the way to the rematch, and I'll be ready," Xander said with his usual forced bravado. "I spent the day watching the tape of Holyfield-Tyson, when Tyson bit Holyfield's ear. I think I have the technique down pat."

"I don't want you out there," Buffy said, returning to the protective mode that she always found so offensive when someone directed it towards her. She had tried many times to keep her friends out of danger, and had only relented on this occasion because she felt she would be able to protect her friends if anything went wrong. Now she knew, however, that she may actually be overmatched. She would be unable to guarantee any of her friends' safety.

"Perhaps you should allow Xander to go," Giles commented. Buffy looked to her mentor with undisguised surprise. Giles had never liked Buffy's friends going with her into battle, as they were only normal humans and were almost completely defenseless. As Willow had further developed her abilities as a witch, he had relented in her case, but he had never liked Xander tagging along. Buffy could not guess at what was going through Giles' mind.

"What?" she asked, completely dumbfounded.

"From what I heard, Xander made a good account of himself last night," Giles said. "If nothing else, he can help you gain an advantage with numbers. I'm certain he can use a stake."

"Sure I can," Xander put in. "Now, it's pointy end first, right?" he asked sarcastically.

"I don't like it," Buffy replied, continuing her resistance. "He can't even move his left arm without pain."

"But I'm right handed," Xander pointed out.

"Let him go, Buffy," Giles continued. "He's a big boy now, and can make this decision for himself. I think by now he knows what he's getting into." He held back any other points, most importantly that Xander was kith. Tristan had warned Giles to never reveal that secret. The mage had maintained that as long as Xander did not know he was magically endowed with good luck, he would never push it too far. The sad truth, Giles knew, was that with all things being equal, Xander was actually more likely to return from a hopeless battle than Buffy was. Not that Giles considered this a hopeless battle, not by any means. Buffy and her friends had certainly faced greater threats than three ancient vampire assassins. It was simply that over previous years, Angel had been around to help, and the fates always provided unexpected assistance, such as Kendra or Faith. This time, Buffy was on her own as the only Slayer. Any aid would have to come from a mysterious mage, a novice witch, and two normal humans.

"I think I'll also be going," Giles said suddenly, the words seeming to burst forth unbidden from his mouth. He could hardly believe that he had volunteered, but as he considered the situation, it made sense.

"That will not be necessary," a voice said from a shadow in the far corner of the room. Every head turned to find that Tristan had appeared, as if from thin air, at some point in the conversation. "My

apprentice will be joining us. That gives us a five to three advantage. We should be fine. We will need you to remain here, to help put us all back together when we return." Giles nodded, accepting his role reluctantly.

"So you have an apprentice?" Giles asked.

"For a few more hours," Tristan said with a smile. "After that, I will once again have a fellow Knight."

"It's getting dark," Buffy commented. "What are we waiting for?"

"A last meal?" Xander asked. Buffy looked at her friend disapprovingly, and walked out the door. Without another word, everyone else followed, and Giles was left alone to hope that all went well. He would hate to have to bury another friend.

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VI

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"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Buffy called into the still night air as she walked through the graveyard. The group had abandoned any plans for using bait, as they had the previous evening. Knowing the strength of their foes, they had no wish to divide their forces.

Buffy and her friends did not have to wait long to find the vampires. Zalos walked into a clearing amongst the tombstones, having chosen an area which he felt would provide the greatest opportunity to finish off his prey. He had been disappointed the night before when the Slayer had been able to escape once again. He would not allow a repeat of his earlier two failures. Buffy grinned at Zalos, and produced a crossbow from behind her back. She was taking no chances in this fight. She would simply dust the leader and then finish off his lackeys with her own bare hands.

For his part, Zalos seemed unconcerned with her weapon. Buffy decided to change that situation, and shot right at Zalos' heart. In a blur of motion that astounded everyone but Tristan, who had seen such feats before, Zalos snatched the crossbow bolt from out of the air just inches from his chest. Buffy looked on in shock, not having been prepared for her plan to fail so quickly.

"Just like American Ninja," Xander muttered.

Buffy immediately collected her thoughts, and once again drew the longsword that she had used with some success the night before. Zalos was ready, ducking below her first slice, rolling toward a nearby gravestone, and picking up his spear, which he had kept hidden close by. In a flash the battle was joined once again.

Before any of her friends could come to her aid, the remaining two vampires assaulted the group from the rear, catching Buffy's friends by surprise. Tristan gathered himself first, swinging his staff in a wide arc to keep the assassins at bay as Riley and Xander prepared to fight the vampire with the daggers. Tristan knew that his job was to

keep the sword-wielding vampire from reaching Riley and Xander. Sean would target the vampire with the daggers, first. Then he would go after Tristan's opponent. Finally, if Buffy had not already finished off Zalos, the entire group would converge on the leader of the Clan. Willow fell back out of reach of all three vampires, and started chanting the words to one of the spells that she had researched. She knew it was not all too powerful, but she hoped that, if nothing else, she could provide at least enough of a distraction to give her friends an advantage.

With all of her strength having returned, Buffy was putting up more of a fight than she had the night before, and Zalos was becoming concerned. In their previous encounter, he had held virtually every advantage. Now, however, the tables had turned greatly. He realized immediately that Buffy was stronger and quicker than he was. However, Zalos knew that the Slayer did not have every edge. He was still more experienced, having hundreds of fights and several centuries to draw upon. Also, as a demon, Zalos knew he would not tire. If he could keep Buffy fighting long enough, she would slow down, and he would eventually break through her formidable defenses. All he needed to do was keep her from killing him before an opportunity presented itself. This was no small task.

Zalos thrust the spear in quickly, and began to pull the weapon back before even completing the strike. He had seen Buffy begin to sidestep the attack and bring her sword in for an overhand slice. The vampire managed to parry the attack, but was left slightly off-balance. In a lightning fast movement, Buffy followed her blocked attack with a kick to the vampire's face, an attack that landed successfully. At that moment, Zalos heard a voice speak in his left ear. "Watch out!" he heard someone yell. He sidestepped quickly to his right, to avoid the mysterious person. Buffy saw her opponent's careless action, and kicked him in the face again. Zalos stole a quick look to his left, and saw no one there. He was confused as to where the voice had come from. Ten yards away, behind a tree, Willow smiled wickedly as she realized her spell had worked. She projected her voice into Zalos' head again, and once more the vampire dodged what he thought was a second opponent. As before, he ended up getting kicked in the face.

Xander and Riley, however, were not faring as well. They had tried to get the vampire with the daggers stuck between the two of them, so that one could swing at the assassin's back while the other occupied his attention in the front. The vampire had proven too quick and experienced, however, and had constantly been able to keep his two opponents in view. Sean watched the three men continue the fight, trying to figure out a way he could use his magic to help out. His powers were largely nature-based, and he could not see how he could be of any use without running in and cutting the vampire in half with his claymore.

The vampire parried Riley's club and dodged Xander's thrust with the stake. The assassin had finally found an opening. He ducked down below the backswing that Riley directed at him, and cut into the back of the soldier's leg, slicing the hamstrings and causing Riley to immediately shift the bulk of his weight to his left leg to avoid falling. In a flash, the vampire then landed a crushing kick on the side of Riley's left knee, causing the joint to buckle. Riley hit the ground with a shout of pain, a slowly growing pool of blood gathering beneath his right leg. The vampire knew that Riley had been rendered

helpless, and so decided to finish off Xander before returning to kill the obviously greater threat.

"Willow!" Xander yelled out, hoping his friend would be able to use a spell to save him. Willow looked in panic at Xander, knowing that she would be unable to help in time. Her spell was only good against one target, and she would have to start the incantation from the beginning before she could help Xander. She knew that Tristan's apprentice was supposed to have been helping the men while she kept Zalos distracted. She had no idea where the wizard's apprentice was hiding.

Xander realized help was not forthcoming, and began to back away toward a couple of trees, which he planned to use for additional cover. He figured he could try to use a tree as a shield, concealing half of his body while he used the stake to attack with the other half. He fell back quickly, desperately hoping that the vampire would pursue him rather than stay to finish off Riley. His wish was granted, and he realized with no small amount of distress that the assassin had decided to kill him first. From his vantage point, Sean smiled as he watched Xander's motions. Finally, he would be able to intervene.

Xander reached the tree and darted behind it, executing his plan smoothly. To his surprise, however, the limbs of the oak animated themselves and seized the vampire as soon as he walked within their reach. Two mighty boughs lifted the dagger-wielding vampire from the ground, holding his wrists in an unbreakable, vise-like grasp. Xander saw the opportunity, and did not wait around to ask questions or see if the tree changed its mind. He took the stake that Buffy had given him, and plunged it into the vampire's chest. The assassin disappeared in a screaming cloud of dust, its daggers dropping to the ground. Xander reached down with a satisfied smile, picked up the weapons, and ran back to tend to Riley.

Tristan was holding his own against his vampire opponent, but was in the same situation as Buffy. He knew that he would tire if the fight went too long, and he did not even have the advantage of having a Slayer's strength and speed until fatigue set in. Tristan had seen Xander kill the first vampire, and was waiting for Sean to finally turn his attention toward the next target. Moments passed, and Tristan's hands began to grow numb from the constant clanging of metal on metal as every one of his attacks was successfully parried away. He would not last much longer. _What was taking Sean?_ He could only imagine that his apprentice was unable to come up with a strategy. Finally, Tristan overextended on an attack, and was forced to fall back quickly as the vampire seized the initiative in the duel. The mage continued to give ground, and then felt the ground become softer underneath his feet. He looked down and saw water seeping up through the earth, and smiled thinly. Sean had apparently come up with a strategy, built primarily on what he knew was his master's strength. Tristan gave a few more steps, causing the vampire to stand in a puddle. The wizard had never fought such a skilled adversary, and knew he would not be able to break through the vampire's defenses. Instead, he allowed his instinct to take over, having his subconscious guide his hands in the motions they would need to make in order to continue to block the assassin's attacks. Instead, Tristan focused his conscious mind not on the fight, but on making his body lighter than air. He floated a half an inch off the ground, an almost imperceptible change in his height. The vampire did

not notice. Then Tristan released a surge of electricity, a magical effect that had become second nature to him. He had trained for fifty years with a storm spirit, and had mastered the effects of electricity and wind. He sent the charge through his staff as he pushed the button to spring the spear tip in one end of the weapon. He then threw the staff into the ground, sending the charge into the ground and through the puddle.

The vampire convulsed for a moment, and that was all Tristan needed. He drew a wickedly sharp, curved elven dagger, and with a flick of his wrist sliced through the vampire's neck and decapitated the demon, causing the two severed parts to each disintegrate in a cloud of dust.

He turned to Buffy and was about to help, but saw that the Slayer had gained control of the fight. Zalos stole a second to survey the situation, and noticed immediately that his cohorts had been destroyed. He knew he could not win on his own, and decided that retreat was the wisest course of action. He backed away from the Slayer quickly, and Buffy reluctantly decided to let him go. She had put up a strong fight, but had to admit that she had not yet fully recovered from being stabbed and poisoned two nights earlier. Just as Zalos had the night before, she decided that it might be best to allow her enemy to retreat rather than to force a fight she might not win.

Tristan, however, would have none of his enemy's retreat. He focused his energy again, and released a bolt of lightning from his fingertips. A blinding flash lit the graveyard for a fraction of a second, and a deafening thunderclap erupted as the air around the lightning bolt was instantaneously heated to incredible temperatures, the atmosphere expanding quickly enough to cause a localized sonic boom. Zalos was stopped dead in his tracks, and staggered. He turned and looked back at Tristan, realizing that the man in gray was a mage. He smiled, knowing that he had been fooled by the lack of a cloak. He bared his fangs and shot across the clearing at the mage, the hatred of decades released in a blur of fury. Tristan was weakened from his release of magical energy, and could not possibly react quickly enough to stop the vampire, so quickly did he move. Fortunately, Buffy was gifted with speed and coordination greater than any mortal or kith. She hurled her sword through the air, sending it blade over hilt as it closed in on its target. Just a step from Tristan, the vampire was hit and exploded in a fiery cloud of dust.

"Riley!" Buffy shouted, finally having time to see her boyfriend lying on the ground. "Oh my God, are you alright?"

"I'll live," Riley said through clenched teeth.

"You'll do better than that," Tristan said with a smile as he staggered over to the fallen soldier. He motioned toward a cluster of trees about a hundred feet away, and Sean came walking forward. "My apprentice is far better at healing magic than I can ever hope to be," Tristan explained. "He is more in tune with nature and life. You'll be fine in no time, Riley."

Sean walked forward wordlessly and placed his hands on Riley's right thigh. His hands began to glow with a pale green light, and a burning sensation ran through Riley's leg. After a few moments, Sean removed

his hands and repeated the process on the left leg, repairing the injured knee. After a few minutes, the burning ceased and became a faint tingling, and then a tickle. "The tickle will remain for several hours as the healing process runs its course," Sean explained. "However, you are already more than able to walk."

Riley looked at the mage dubiously, and then reached up to Buffy. The Slayer pulled her lover to his feet, and he stared with disbelief at his own legs. "I don't believe it," he muttered.

"You don't have to," Sean said with a smile. "Lucky for you, I'm not a faith healer."

"Good luck in the future, Miss Summers," Tristan said with a slight bow. "My colleague and I must now take our leave of you." Sean looked at his mentor with pride, catching the reference to him being a colleague rather than an apprentice.

"You're leaving already?" Willow asked. More than anyone else she had hoped to get to know Tristan better. She had wanted to learn more about his magic.

"Sunnydale is a safe place for the mortals; it has a Slayer," Tristan explained. "There are other places that are not so lucky. Iseult's Knights have sworn to forever defend the innocent. There is no need for us here as long as the Slayer fights the good fight. I hope to see you again, Miss Summers."

"Buffy," the Slayer returned with a smile. "You can call me Buffy."

"Good luck, Buffy," Tristan said with a warm smile. "I hope to see you again."

Without another word, Tristan and Sean walked off, a thin mist rising behind them as they went, obscuring any view of them and causing them to disappear from Buffy's sight far sooner than they normally would have been able to.

"Well, that wasn't such a chore, now was it?" Xander asked with a smile. His friends simply looked at him and laughed, and Buffy and her friends walked home.

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Epilogue

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"I can't believe it's over," Sean said breathlessly, looking down from a cliff and into the Pacific Ocean. "We finally won."

"Yes," Tristan returned, an inexplicable gloom overcoming him. "But I feel I may have damned myself with my methods."

"No one will ever know that it was you that hired the Clan of Zalos to assassinate the Slayer," Sean countered.

"I'll know," Tristan replied. "That's enough."

"We could never have defeated them on our own," Sean pointed out, trying to rationalize Tristan's actions with the same arguments the older mage had made to himself time and time again. "Your plan was ingenious. You used a middleman to hire our enemies to kill the Slayer, knowing she would have to fight for her life. Then we could show up and add our might to hers, killing off the last members of the Clan. With Zalos dead, his guild is also destroyed forever. They have been punished for the crime they committed against Carmina."

"I know," Tristan responded sadly. "But our actions were manipulative. We behaved as if we were half-demon rather than kith. If we had asked the Slayer for help, she would likely have given it. Besides, the vendetta was ours, and not hers. We could have gotten her killed."

"She's strong," Sean replied. "Stronger than many of the Slayers I've read about."

"And more of a real young woman," Tristan said with a smile. "We'll have to return here someday, Sean," the older mage said. "And next time, there will be no deception. I feel I owe Miss Summers a debt because of my dishonor. I will have to come back to clear accounts."

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Fin

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End
file.